



National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) Review

Submission to the Productivity Commission



For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the NSW peak body representing children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that support them. Our members and board are made up of highly experienced youth Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) providers who have direct knowledge of the issues homeless young people face across NSW.

Our approach focuses on five foundations:



**Safety and
Stability**



**Home and
Place**



**Health and
Wellness**



**Connections and
Participation**



**Education and
Employment**

We believe all five foundations must be present for young people to live flourishing and meaningful lives.

Contrary to community perceptions, youth homelessness remains a significant issue in Australia. Last year, almost 41,652 or 15% of all clients children and young people aged 15 – 24 presented alone to homelessness services nationally, seeking accommodation and assistance (AIHW, 2021b).

Considering Yfoundations' expertise in youth homelessness, our submission will focus on the needs of young people, particularly those affected by homelessness.

Summary of Recommendations

Yfoundations recommends the following:

1.

When drafting the next NHHA, the Federal and State Governments must remove the term 'prevalence' from outcome C to reduce the burden on specialist homelessness services.

2.

Expand outcome E to include a focus on a well-functioning housing market which also has sufficient affordable options for young people on low incomes in the next NHHA.

3.

The Federal and NSW Governments must commit to building more youth specific social housing.

4.

The Federal Government directs State and Territory Governments to quarantine 20% of social housing properties to young people.

5.

Federal and State Governments commits resources to develop and fund an overarching National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy which outlines the approaches and resources required to effectively prevent, intervene and respond to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

6.

As part of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy, the Federal and State Governments commit to funding research to better understand the causes and consequences of youth homelessness in Australia. The research agenda will explore and identify best practice approaches to respond effectively to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Executive Summary

Thousands of children and young people continue to experience homelessness across NSW. The NHHA has failed our children and young people and will continue failing them if something isn't done urgently. Whilst children and young people are a target cohort in the NHHA, they often fall through the gaps. The 2021 Homelessness Inquiry Report conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs (Parliament of Commonwealth Australia, 2021) demonstrated a lack of focus on young people by only identifying them intermittently in the report and minimal recommendations without any real substance.

The evidence is compelling: children and young people who are impacted by child abuse, domestic and family violence, couch surfing, living in unsafe overcrowded accommodation, exiting youth justice, and street sleeping, are too often ending up in the youth homelessness service system. A system that was never designed to be the end of the road for other failed sectors. A system that is inadequately resourced to respond in ways that children and young people are given every opportunity to be safe, free from abuse, trauma and violence. A system that is not resourced to support children and young people to live their best lives and be given opportunities to thrive and enter adulthood equipped with life skills.

However, the youth homelessness service system continues to plug the gaps of other service systems without additional resources and the absence of a government commitment for mainstream agencies to meet the responsibilities of their portfolios. Youth specialist homelessness services cannot continue to prop up the inadequacies of other portfolios such as child protection, out of home care (OOHC), health, and youth justice. All roads of system failures must not end up in the youth homelessness sector unless a dedicated strategy and additional resources are in place to achieve the outcomes our children and young people deserve.

The Productivity Commission's review of the NHHA is a timely and ideal opportunity to transform the focus of the NHHA so that children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness receive tailored, person centred, trauma informed, and sound evidenced based responses – now and into the future.

Against this background, Yfoundations is calling for the NSW and Federal Government to implement a dedicated National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy that responds to the diversity and complexity of the children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to support their transition into a future of self-reliance and wellbeing. It is only by doing so that we can work towards preventing youth homelessness, intervening early before young people become entrenched in homelessness and disadvantage, and providing evidenced based best practice responses to young people experiencing homelessness.

It is time for this to stop. It's now time to start working in meaningful ways to turn off the tap to stop the unending flow of homelessness for children and young people. If we get this right now, then we will effectively be turning off the tap for the next generation of adults.

Is the objective of the NHHA appropriate and has it been met?

This section responds to the following questions posed by the Productivity Commission:

- Is the NHHA's objective appropriate to "contribute to improving access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing across the housing spectrum, including to prevent and address homelessness, and to support social and economic participation?"
- Has the NHHA met its objective to "contribute to improving access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing across the housing spectrum, including to prevent and address homelessness, and to support social and economic participation"

YFoundations response: Whilst the objective is appropriate, it has failed to appropriately respond to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The facts: Homelessness continues to worsen for children and young people

- There has been a 25% increase in 12 to 24-year-olds experiencing homelessness in Australia (ABS, 2016). It is likely that this percentage will increase in the results for the 2021 Census due to the affordable housing crisis in Australia and the Covid 19 pandemic.
- Nationally, nearly 42,000 15 to 24 year olds presented alone to a SHS in 2020-21 (AIHW, 2021b).
- 59% of young people presenting alone had previously been assisted by a SHS agency at some point since 2011 (Ibid).
- The main reasons these young people presented alone to SHS nationally in 2020-21 was domestic and family violence (17%) followed closely by housing crisis (17%) and relationship/family breakdown (at nearly 13%) (Ibid)
- In 2020-21, 49% of young people aged 15-24 years presenting alone to a SHS were at risk of homelessness and 51% were already experiencing homelessness (Ibid)

- Children and young people aged 15-24 represent 23% of unassisted requests for a SHS nationally (Ibid).
- Around a third of young people aged 15-24 years presenting alone identified as Indigenous (Ibid)

As the number of young people experiencing homelessness grows across Australia, it's clear that the NHHA has not met its objective of preventing and addressing youth homelessness.

Preventing homelessness

Research has found that by diverting just 5% of young people entering the homelessness system every year, the Federal Government could save \$60m annually (McKenzie et. al, 2016).

There is a distinct lack of funding for early prevention and intervention approaches in the NHHA for children and young people. Early intervention and prevention initiatives aim to identify and address the physical, social and emotional challenges that young people and their families face early on and the structural causes of homelessness before its onset (Gaetz, et. al, 2018;). By intervening early, these programmes avoid the negative outcomes young people face as a result of their homelessness (Ibid), such as disengagement from education and early school leaving, mental and physical health issues, drug and alcohol abuse and incarceration (Kamieniecki, 2010; Moore, 2017; Hail-Jares et al., 2021; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Santa Maria et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2020) - saving the Federal and State Governments large sums in the process.

Addressing homelessness

The NHHA seeks to address youth homelessness by funding SHS to provide young people with 24/7 accommodation and support. However, these services often fill the gaps and support young people who have been failed by other services, when they are not adequately resourced to do so. This means they have to turn people away. A 2019 ACOSS survey found that 36% of SHS staff reported rarely or never being able to meet demand (ACOSS, 2019) and in 2020/2021, on average, more than 300 people were turned away from crisis accommodation each day in Australia because there was no accommodation (AIHW, 2021b).

Children and young people in SHS face very few exit options, meaning they get stuck in a cycle of homelessness where they are forced to 'refuge-hop' between youth SHS services couch surf or even sleep rough (Yfoundations, 2021b). Recent data showcased this unfortunate cycle of homelessness. The AIHW found that three out of five (59%) young people in Australia who presented to SHS in 2020/2021 had previously been assisted by a SHS agency at some point since July 2011 (AIHW, 2021b).

During the period that children and young people are in refuges, staff work with them to identify longer-term solutions. However, this often can be difficult as staff spend most of the time just trying to stabilise the child or young person as they often present with trauma and complex issues. Staff use this time to

support the young person to: access other services (i.e., mental health services such as Headspace); develop their case plan and safety plan; undertake a risk assessment; and help them to access benefits where appropriate. More often than not, these young people do not have the option to return home and their exit options into long-term affordable housing (such as social housing, medium-term housing, transitional housing or private rentals) are highly unlikely due to the lack of availability. Further, many of our young people are not developmentally ready for programmes or accommodation options which are designed to support transitions to independent living. This is where children and young people must have options where they are supported in accommodation such as Foyer like models, medium term accommodation, and transitional accommodation. These are discussed further in the response to Outcome E of this submission.

The diversity of issues and complexity of need of children and young people

Any future NHHA objective must articulate the diverse issues and complex needs of children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The Productivity Commission's review of the NHHA is a timely and ideal opportunity to transform how children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness are positioned in future agreements. Children and young people must receive responses that are person centred, trauma informed, and multi-disciplinary. The NHHA is too generic to meet the needs of children and young people presenting to SHS and to end youth homelessness, we need a much more systemic approach. Children and young people must be set apart from the adult cohorts to allow policy makers, service designers, mainstream service systems, and the youth sector to shape their approaches and responses to the diverse range of clients that present to youth homelessness services.

The following sections describe the diversity and layers of complexity of the children and young people who access youth specialist homelessness services.

Children and young people who are victims of domestic and family violence

During 2020-21 in Australia, 1 in 3 SHS clients who experienced family and domestic violence were under the age of 18.

Nationally, the main reason young people aged 15-24 year olds who presented alone to SHS in 2020-21 was domestic and family violence (17%)

AIHW SHS Annual Report 2020-21

The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that children and young people who are exposed to family violence can experience a wide range of outcomes that impact their future well-being such as:

- homelessness
- diminished educational attainment

- reduced social participation in early adulthood
- physical and psychological disorders
- suicidal ideation
- behavioural difficulties
- future victimisation and/or violent offending (AIHW 2018; Bland & Shallcross 2015; Campo 2015; De Maio et al. 2013; Holt et al. 2008; Jaffe et al. 2012; Knight 2015).

When a child is exposed to family violence along with multiple risk factors, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, parental mental ill health, and parental substance abuse, more extreme negative outcomes are likely (Casey et al. 2009; Campo 2015; Fergusson et al. 2006; Fulu et al. 2013). However, exposure to family violence alone does not mean a child will necessarily experience negative outcomes. With the right support, children exposed to family violence can have increased resilience later in life (Alaggia & Donohue 2018; Campo 2015; Jaffe et al. 2012).

Children and young people who are victims of abuse and neglect

Abuse and neglect in early life has enduring social, psychological and neurobiological effects for survivors, but it is also one of the leading causes of youth homelessness across the globe (Embleton et al., 2016). Relationship/family breakdown is one of the most prevalent reasons why children and young people present to SHS alone¹ (AIHW, 2021c). Evidence suggests that many of these breakdowns occur in the context of intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect (Taylor et al, 2020).

The child protection system has a statutory responsibility to care for all under 18 year olds but too often they end up in the SHS system because case workers are often reluctant to step in with this group. This is largely because they often struggle to find foster and kinship care placements for children and young people with complex needs.

Children and young people with high and complex needs

Many young people who experience homelessness also mental health and drug abuse issues, which are often co-occurring. Researchers estimate that 50 to 80% of homeless young people have experienced mental illness (Kamieniecki, 2001), and 40 to 70% have drug abuse issues (Gomez, Thompson, and Barczyk, 2010).

Youth homelessness services do not receive sufficient funding to provide the 24/7 therapeutic support that many young people with complex needs require. Our services work tirelessly to provide a safe place for these vulnerable children and young people and to help reunify them with their families; however, they are only able to provide a broad response which does not meet these needs of this cohort.

 [See Yfoundations position paper about housing for young people with complex needs](#)

Children and young people who are victims/survivors of human trafficking, exploitation and forced marriages

The range of complex needs and issues experienced by children and young people presenting to youth

¹The primary reason in NSW and third highest reason nationally (AIHW, 2021a)

homelessness services also extends to trauma, physical and mental health issues resulting from trafficking, sexual exploitation, child labour, and victims/survivors of forced marriages.

According to the National Strategy Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030, particular groups of children and young people are more vulnerable to sexual abuse because of their exposure to certain risk factors. For example, factors that can impact the likelihood of a perpetrator of child sexual abuse targeting a child or young person can include family violence, family breakdown or homelessness - which are all the most prevalent reasons why young people present to SHSs.

Anecdotally, service providers are seeing children and young people being forced into trading sexual favours, drug dealing or servitude in exchange for accommodation (Canberra Times 2017)

Children and young people exiting out of home care (OOHC)

Children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) are expected to become independent by the time they turn 18. Young people in OOHC have experienced abuse or neglect prior to entering care, and have also suffered the trauma of being removed from their families (Campo & Commerford, 2016). These experiences mean that OOHC leavers are at particular risk of adverse outcomes. Compared to the average population, they are more likely to disengage from education and employment, come into contact with the criminal justice system and suffer with mental and physical health issues. These problems are both the cause and consequence of high rates of housing instability and homelessness among young people leaving OOHC.

A recent national survey of care leavers undertaken by CREATE has shown that 30% of participants were homeless during their first year of leaving care. Of those who experienced homelessness, 37% were homeless for more than six months (McDowall, 2020).

 [See Yfoundations position paper on preventing homelessness among out of home care leavers](#)

Children and young people in youth justice

Hundreds of unsentenced adolescents are held in NSW detention centres simply because they are homeless. In 2019-20 alone, 236 highly vulnerable adolescents were held under Section 28 of the Bail Act (Department of Communities and Justice, 2021a) because they didn't have an appropriate bail address to go to. Many of these children and young people can't go home and they also struggle to find appropriate accommodation through the OOHC and youth SHS system (Yfoundations, 2021a).

Yfoundations' research has shown that adolescents experiencing homelessness are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than the average population (Yfoundations 2021).

 [Yfoundations conducted extensive research on children and young people in youth justice](#)

Children and young people who use violence in the family home

Our recent research report revealed that committing offences – particularly violent offences in the home

– often leads adolescents to become homeless. In 2021, 60 out of 90 young people who were diverted by the Bail Assistance Line, an after-hours service that exhausts all options before they deny bail to children and young people experiencing homelessness (Klauzner, 2021), were charged with domestic and family violence offences. This is because families are often reluctant to have their offending child return to the home or they may be prevented from doing so by a legal order. SHS and out-of-home care (OOHC) providers also report that they are also not resourced enough to meet the complex needs of this highly vulnerable group (Yfoundations, 2021a).

Children and young people with a disability

Young people with disability are one of the most vulnerable groups within our community. Some research suggests that homeless children are more likely to have physical disability and/or emotional or behavioural problems than housed children (Bassuk et al. 2015; Clair 2018). But unfortunately, these young people can often struggle to access support and SHS are not always sufficiently funded to help them. Recent interviews conducted as part of Yfoundation’s Research Report into medium term accommodation evidenced that getting a young person on the NDIS is a lengthy process and many young people do not meet the criteria needed to be accepted or do not have the necessary paperwork (Yfoundations, 2021a).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the homelessness population.

In 2020-2021, 1 in 3 young people aged 15 to 24 who presented to SHS in NSW identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW, 2021a).

At the last Census in 2016, 4 in 10 Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness were under the age of 18 (AIHW, 2019).

This over-representation was further evidenced in Mission Australia’s National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth report which drew on 1,500 responses from 15 to 19-year-olds who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Hall et al, 2020a). The report found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were three times more likely than non-Indigenous respondents to have experienced no fixed address or lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation (16.2% vs 5.9%). Also, more than double the number of respondents in the report who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people reported experiencing couch surfing, compared to non-Indigenous respondents (28.9% compared with 12.0% of non-Indigenous young people) (Hall et al, 2020a).

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

A significant percentage of humanitarian entrants to Australia are 10 to 24 years old (Deloitte Access Economics, 2019). These children and young people face higher levels of income insecurity than the rest

of the population, which puts them at a heightened risk of youth homelessness (Flatau et al, 2015). Unlike Australian residents and citizens, temporary visa holders are ineligible for income support and social housing. Without this support these children and young people are pushed towards exploitative labour practices and face exploitation in the private rental market (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020).

Children and young people from the LGBTQIA+ community

Young LGBTQIA+ people face various forms of discrimination and exclusion which among other things, make them particularly at risk of experiencing homelessness. Indeed, the Writing themselves in 4 report, based on a survey of 6,418 LGBTQIA+ Australians aged 14 to 21, revealed that almost a quarter had experienced homelessness in their life (Hill et al, 2021). Recent studies have shown that it also plays a particularly significant role in driving LGBTQIA+ youth into homelessness (Hill et al., 2021). Half of the respondents to the Writing themselves in 4 report, specifically identified 'family rejection' as a cause of their homelessness (Ibid). And more than 95% of LGB respondents to the Journeys Home survey of factors affecting housing stability cited 'family conflict/relationship breakdown' as a key reason they became homeless under the age of 18, compared to 75% of their heterosexual counterparts (Dempsey et al, 2021).

The lack of national data on LGBTQIA+ young people means we still have a lot to uncover about LGBTQIA+ young people and their experiences of homelessness.

Almost a quarter of LGBTQIA+ youth in Australia have experienced homelessness in their life. They're more likely to be rejected or abused by their family than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Hill, A., O. et al (2021), Writing Themselves In 4 Report)

Children and young people in regional and rural NSW

In 2019-2020, more than a third (7,121 or 36%) of 12 to 25-year-olds who accessed homelessness services in NSW lived in rural or regional areas (AIHW, 2020c). According to the 2016 Census, the rate of homelessness amongst 15 to 24-year-olds living in remote and very remote areas in Australia (6.2% or 3,600 young people) was substantially higher than for those living in major cities (0.8% or 16,700), inner regional areas (0.5% or 2,300) and outer regional areas (0.7% or 1,500) (ABS, 2016). This difference can be largely explained by the higher rates of severe overcrowding amongst young people in these areas (5.6% for remote and very remote compared with 0.4% for major cities) (Ibid).

Despite these alarming numbers, there are certain areas of the state, such as far western and north-western NSW, that have no youth-specific crisis accommodation at all, meaning, children and young people experiencing homelessness in these areas have nowhere to turn and are forced to travel considerable distances to access support.



[See Yfoundations' position paper on regional and rural youth homelessness](#)

Are the outcomes of NHHHA appropriate and have they achieved outcomes for children and young people?

NHHA Outcomes:

(A): a well-functioning social housing system that operates efficiently, sustainably and is effective in assisting low-income households and priority homelessness cohorts to manage their needs;

(B): affordable housing options for people on low-to-moderate incomes;

(C) an effective homelessness service system, which responds to and supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to achieve and maintain housing, and addresses the incidence and prevalence of homelessness

(D) improved housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians;

(E) a well-functioning housing market that responds to local conditions; and

(F) improved transparency and accountability in respect of housing and homelessness strategies, spending and outcomes.

Yfoundations believes that outcomes A, B, D, F are appropriate and should remain in future iterations of the NHHHA. However, consideration should be made to remove 'prevalence' from Outcome C as it seems to imply that the SHS sector is responsible for preventing homelessness, which is a structural issue and beyond its scope and funding received. The outcomes in the AIHW data supports the position that SHS are not funded adequately to provide preventative responses that can have a real impact for children and young people. Research indicates that effective prevention requires targeting those most at risk of homelessness before its onset (O'Regan et al., 2021). By the time these young people have presented to a SHS, it's often too late to do preventative work.

Further, Outcome E should be expanded to include an imperative for the housing market to provide sufficient affordable options for young people on low to middle incomes.

This section will focus on analysing outcomes A, B, C, and D and whether the NHHHA has achieved these. Outcome E is beyond the scope of Yfoundations' focus and expertise. Outcome F will call on governments to improve transparency and accountability for children and young people by delivering a National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy that includes adequate funding and ambitious outcomes.

Recommendation 1: When drafting the next NHHHA, the Federal and State Governments must remove the term 'prevalence' from outcome C to reduce the burden on specialist homelessness services.

Recommendation 2: Expand outcome E to include a focus on a well-functioning housing market which also has sufficient affordable options for young people on low incomes in the next NHHHA.

Outcome A: Has the NHA achieved a well-functioning social housing system that meets and manages the needs of children and young people?

Yfoundations' response: The NHA has failed to achieve a well-functioning social housing system that meets and manages the needs of young people.

Only 2.4% of 15 – 24-year-olds are the main tenants in public housing and represent only 4.9% of the main tenants in community housing (AIHW, 2021c).

Currently, the social housing system in NSW is inefficient, unsustainable, and ineffective in assisting young people.

In NSW young people face greater challenges than any other age group in securing sustainable and affordable housing. In part, this is because they are more economically disadvantaged and experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and precarious work than the general population (Tiller et al., 2020). Since the Global Financial Crisis, young people's wages have continued to fall while those of older Australians have continued to rise (Productivity Commission, 2020). This has only become worse following the pandemic (Tiller et al., 2020).

Due to the lack of affordable private rentals young people face very few options when leaving either crisis or transitional accommodation. One option is to join the social housing waitlist. But in 2021 the waitlist had almost 50,000 people on it and young people are not always eligible for priority housing (AIHW, 2021c). This means, that despite being less independent than older age groups, young people face an average wait time of five to ten years to access social housing (Barnes et al, 2021). There is also no policy that requires community housing providers (CHPs) to quarantine a percentage of their housing portfolio for young people. To further exacerbate this, some evidence suggests that CHPs are less likely to prioritise young people's applications because they think they're risky tenants (Mackenzie et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the NSW Government's current social housing strategy is failing to address these issues. To better achieve this outcome and support young people, the Federal and NSW Governments must commit to building more youth specific social housing. For more details on the specificities of youth-specific social housing please see [Yfoundations' factsheet](#).

Recommendation 3: The Federal and NSW Governments must commit to building more youth specific social housing

Recommendation 4: The Federal Government directs State and Territory Governments to quarantine 20% of social housing properties to young people

Outcome B: Has the NHHA achieved affordable housing options for young people on low-to-moderate incomes?

Yfoundations' response: The NHHA has shamefully failed young people on low-to-moderate incomes to access affordable housing options

When a young person is located in a youth refuge, staff work with residents to identify longer-term housing solutions such as applying for social housing, accessing medium-term or transitional accommodation, or entering private rental accommodation. However, due to the lack of affordable housing in NSW and Australia wide, these options are not feasible. And so, these young people become stuck in a cycle of homelessness where they are forced to 'refuge-hop' between youth SHS services, couch surf or sleep rough.

Young people across NSW also face skyrocketing rental prices which, combined with low wages, put them at a heightened risk of homelessness. According to Anglicare's Rental Affordability snapshot there was not a single rental property throughout Australia that would be affordable for a young person on Youth Allowance in March 2021 (Anglicare, 2021). Young people are also more likely to experience rental stress than older Australians. In 2017-18, over half (55%) of 15–24-year-olds paid a staggering 30% of their income on housing costs, which was a higher proportion than any other age group (ABS, 2019).

The situation is no different in NSW. Data commissioned by Yfoundations found that the main reason 18 to 25-year-olds sought help from homelessness services in NSW last year was because they were experiencing a housing crisis (AIHW, 2020b). This isn't surprising when looking at NSW's rental prices: Sydney continues to be one of the most expensive cities in Australia with a median rent of \$582 per week (Chau, 2021). Housing in regional NSW has also become increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible with prices rising by 28% in the past year and vacancy rates falling below 1% (Burke, 2021; NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, 2021). As well as rising costs, young people also face further challenges when trying to secure a property. These include age-based discrimination, a lack of rental references and insecure share-housing (Hall et al., 2020a; Choice et al., 2017; Tenants' Union of NSW and Youth Action, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the Australian Government has not increased Youth Allowance since 1994, leaving it at a measly \$36/day. Commonwealth Rent Assistance is also insufficient to meet the needs of low-income renters, with 40% of recipients still being in rental stress after the payment (Productivity Commission, 2019). To address this, Yfoundations endorses the Raise the Rate campaign, which calls for an increase of Youth Allowance to \$65/day (with ongoing indexation to wages) and a 50% increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance. We also encourage the Government to expand the eligibility criteria for these support payments to refugees and migrants, who are currently ineligible until they gain permanent residency.

To support vulnerable young people access the private rental market, the NSW Government has

introduced a range of private rental assistance programs. One of these is Rent Choice Youth. For more details on this program, see our [factsheet](#).⁷

Rent Choice Youth has been well received by the sector and has had some positive impacts on some young people (Park & Kettell, 2021). However, some providers have expressed concern that the program doesn't meet the needs of all young people, particularly those who are unable to live independently and work. Further to this, eligibility requirements creates barriers for most young people who are in professions that are unlikely to yield incomes that could afford the future cost of rent which is a requirement of Rent Choice Youth. Consultation with members also suggested that due to a lack of social and affordable housing in some areas, the Rent Choice Youth program has become a last resort for young people who require assistance. This means young people are pushed to enter the program even when they are not ready, and many drop out before its completion. Caseworkers also felt that rising rental costs and low vacancy rates across NSW meant that when the program ended, young people would still struggle to afford rental costs. This raised questions about the sustainability and long-lasting effects of the program.

To encourage uptake of the program amongst real estate agents and case workers, Yfoundations delivered Foot in the Door from 2018-19 to 2020-21 (Yfoundations, 2021c). This was a training program that aimed to educate real estate agents on youth homelessness and how to support young people at risk of experiencing homelessness. It also sought to encourage SHS and real estate agents to work together to help young people in need.

The Strategy the NSW Government acknowledges the importance of training program for the real estate sector to prevent homelessness. However, despite positive results (Yfoundations, 2021c), the NSW Government defunded Foot in the Door in 2021 – directly contradicting its policy to increase access for young people in the private rental market. As young people continue to face discrimination in the private rental market, it is important that the NSW Government continues to invest in these program to help young people maintain their tenancies and, therefore, avoid entering the homelessness system.



[See Yfoundations' position paper about the barriers to young people renting](#)

Outcome C: Has the NHHA provided an effective homelessness service system, which responds to and supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to achieve and maintain housing, and addresses the incidence and prevalence of homelessness?

Yfoundations' response: The NHHA has failed to provide an effective homelessness service system for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Because of the NHHA inadequacies, we are seeing the numbers of children and young people experiencing homelessness consistently increase for too long. The evidence is compelling, the NHHA has failed to achieve its outcomes. We see too many:

- children presenting to youth SHS alone when they should be in OOHC
- children and young people being detained in correctional facilities because they have no home to return to
- children and young people cycling through the crisis system because there are no exit options.
- children and young people experiencing family breakdown and violence with nowhere to go.
- young people unable to access the private rental market because it's unaffordable and out of reach
- young people facing long wait times to access social housing
- children and young people being forced to couch surf or live in overcrowded accommodation because they have no other options.

Youth homelessness services and refuges are designed to offer a broad, short-term crisis response for homeless young people but they frequently support more children and young people than their contracts require. This means they have limited capacity to implement preventative approaches to address the prevalence of homelessness. Research has shown that effective prevention requires targeting those most at risk of homelessness before its onset (O'Regan et al., 2021). By the time these young people present to SHS, it's often too late.

Although our services do the best they can with the resources they are given, the NHHA has failed to provide an effective homelessness service system that can respond to and support young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. To achieve this, many more specialised services are needed to cater to the diverse needs of young people who are currently falling through the cracks. These are not only additional youth services that provide accommodation but also therapeutic foster and residential care placements, additional drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, more medium-term accommodation, Youth Foyers, and transitional accommodation, which all help young people transition to independence.

There is also a distinct lack of exit options for young people. When young people access crisis accommodation, they can only do so for a short time as these services are typically only funded to offer accommodation for up to 28 days. When this period ends, young people face very few exit options, meaning they become stuck in a cycle of homelessness where they are forced to 'refuge-hop' between youth SHS services, couch surf or even sleep rough (Yfoundations, 2021b).

The following statistics tell a damning story of how the NHHA has failed children and young people. The results speak for themselves.

- There has been a 25% increase in 12 to 24-year-olds experiencing homelessness in Australia (ABS, 2016). It is likely that this percentage will increase in the upcoming 2021 Census data due to the affordable housing crisis in Australia and the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Nationally, there were nearly 42,000 young people aged 15-24 years old that presented alone to a SHS in 2021 (AIHW 2021b).
- 1 in 3 SHS clients who experienced DFV were under the age of 18 (Ibid).
- Nearly 47% of children and young people (aged 0-24) who sought a SHS experienced family and domestic violence in 2020-21 (Ibid).
- 71% of young people presenting alone to SHS in 2020-21 were not enrolled in any form of education at the start of the support (Ibid).
- 59% of young people presenting alone had previously been assisted by a SHS agency at some point since 2011 (Ibid).
- Children and young people aged 15-24 represent 23% of unassisted requests for a SHS nationally (Ibid).

The failure of governments to provide an effective homelessness service system for children and young people has meant they are sadly escalating into the homelessness population. Too frequently, children and young people are becoming part of the one or multiple homelessness client groups which are discussed following.

Couch Surfing

Nationally, 29% of young people presenting to SHS alone were couch surfing at the time of presentation compared to 16% of the overall SHS population. Among the 15 to 24-year-olds who presented to SHS in NSW in 2020/2021, 24% (3,329) had experienced couch surfing (AIHW, 2021a).

Couch surfing amongst young people is often hidden and difficult to identify. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) concedes that counting the numbers of couch surfers in the Census is difficult their hosts that they are unable to return home or because the person filling out the Census form assumes the young person has a permanent residence to return to eventually.

When children and young people couch surf, they tend to stay with a friend, relative, acquaintance or even a stranger. The length and times a teenager couch surfs can vary significantly. In some cases, it can be an isolated incident while in others it can be ongoing. We do know that when young people couch surf, they experience several negative outcomes. Firstly, they are not included on the lease which puts them at risk of eviction and exploitation. They also report poor overall mental health, a decline in their school performance and an increase in substance misuse.

Anecdotally, it is understood that children and young people who are couch surfing are being forced into trading sexual favours, drug dealing or servitude in exchange for accommodation (Canberra Times 2017)

A 2021 study based in Brisbane, found that young people who couch surfed experienced much higher levels of psychological distress than the general population. Nearly 70% (n = 44) of the study's respondents who couch surfed showed high levels of psychological distress. This was then followed by 22.2% (n = 14) who reported high levels of psychological distress. Only a small number – 7.9% (n = 5) reported moderate levels (Hail-Jares, Vichta-Ohlsen, Nash, 2021).

Children and young people presenting to SHS alone

- Nationally, 41,652 young people 15-24 years or 15% of all SHS clients, presented alone to SHS in 2020-21 (AIHW 2021b).
- The main reason these young people presented alone to homelessness services nationally in 2020-21 was family and domestic violence (17%) followed closely by housing crisis (17%) and relationship/family breakdown (13%) (Ibid).
- In 2019-2020, 2381 children aged between 12 to 15 years old presented alone to SHS in NSW (AIHW 2020a).
- During 2020-21, 13,507 of 15 to 24-year-olds presented alone to SHS in NSW - a 9% increase over the past 10 years (AIHW, 2021a). This equates to 1 in 5 (19%) of all people presenting to NSW homelessness services (Ibid).

For too long, youth SHS have carried the burden of supporting children presenting to their services when they should be in OOHC. When youth SHS support these children, they are funded disproportionately compared to other providers.

”

I actually have zero expectation that there will be any sort of support or acknowledgement of anyone pretty well over 14 or 15. There's nothing there. You can report until the cows come home, and you know nothing is going to happen... I don't know how urgent you'd have to be to receive a response.

SHS Leader

Yfoundations' research, and that of the NSW Ombudsman, suggests that SHS providers' Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports to Child Protection about 12 to 15-year-olds often go unanswered (Yfoundations, 2020; NSW Ombudsman, 2018). This is because the system is overburdened and caseworkers prioritise younger children over teenagers. There is also a severe shortage of intensive family interventions and lack of appropriate out-of-home care placements for adolescents, particularly those with complex needs. As a result, our under-funded youth SHS are left with limited resources to care for these traumatised children experiencing homelessness.

”

We will complete a mandatory report every time we believe there is a Risk of Significant Harm for that young person. So, we have a couple of young people where we've done 60 and 70 reports to DCJ, and DCJ have pretty much said to us 'stop doing them we're not going to do anything for this young person

SHS Manager

Caseworkers within the Child Protection system have a statutory responsibility to care for all under 18-year olds but are often reluctant to step in with this group. This is largely because they often struggle to find foster and kinship care placements for children and young people with complex needs as there is a dire shortage of alternative, therapeutic accommodation across the OOH system.

Children aged between 12 to 15 years old are allowed to stay in youth SHS temporarily, while caseworkers assess their situation and – wherever possible – work towards family reunification. The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) funds 17 SHS providers across 19 regions in NSW to support this work through the Homelessness Youth Assistance Program (HYAP).

A 2020 evaluation of HYAP found that SHSs were successfully supporting those 12 to 15-year-olds experiencing homelessness who can safely return home to do so (Taylor, 2020). This demonstrates that specialised responses can prevent children escalating into homelessness. However, SHS providers that provide HYAP receive a disproportionate amount of funding compared to OOH providers. Many of the children who turn up alone to SHS come from homes experiencing intergenerational issues including such as family violence, abuse and neglect. They require much more intensive interventions than youth SHS are funded to provide and should be in OOH.



[See Yfoundations' position paper on unaccompanied children and young people accessing homelessness services](#)

Children and young people living in overcrowded accommodation

In the 2016 Census, 60% of young people aged 16-24 years were living in severely overcrowded houses.

ABS, (2016), Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness

According to the 2016 Census, those under the age of 25 made up 45% of those experiencing severe overcrowding in NSW, despite making up only 31% of the total population (ABS, 2016). Research has shown that overcrowding can have negative impacts on children and young people's health, development and education outcomes (Dockery et al. 2013). This is problematic considering education plays a crucial role in breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and homelessness. Overcrowding can also increase the likelihood of family conflict and tenancy dissolution, which is a large driver of further youth homelessness (Brackertz, et al. 2019).

Children and young people sleeping rough

According to the 2016 census, 3% of 12 to 25-year-olds experiencing homelessness in Australia are 'rough sleepers'. Research has shown that homelessness street counts are often inaccurate (Clarke, 2016), particularly as rough sleepers are not always identifiable. Therefore, in reality the number of young people sleeping rough in Australia is likely to be much higher. According to The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia study, over half of young people under the age of 25 receiving support from homelessness services in Australia slept rough at least once prior to turning 18 (MacKenzie, 2016).

Outcome D: Has the NHHA improved housing outcomes for young Indigenous Australians?

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be overrepresented in the homelessness population across Australia and in NSW. Mission Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Survey (2019) found that First Nations young people aged 15 to 19-year were three times more likely than non-Indigenous respondents, to have experienced no fixed address or lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation (16.2% vs 5.9%) (Hall et al, 2020b). Also, more than double the number of respondents in the report who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people reported experiencing couch surfing, compared to non-Indigenous respondents (28.9% compared with 12.0% of non-Indigenous young people) (Hall et.al, 2020b).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also 2.3 times more likely to experience rental stress than the rest of the population (AHURI, 2017). In NSW, there is also currently a shortfall of 11,000 social housing homes for Aboriginal families and a lack of culturally appropriate social housing options (Ibid). Unfortunately, the deficit in social housing for this cohort is only predicted to increase in the next 10 years (Ibid).

These issues are heavily linked to the discrimination of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, which has a long history in Australia and continues to this day. According to The Inclusive Australia Social Inclusion Index young people and Aboriginal people were the groups that reported experiencing the most discrimination in Australia (Faulkner, 2021). Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are therefore, doubly disadvantaged due to their age and race/cultural background.

Mission Australia's 2021 Youth Survey indicated that (Tiller et al., 2021) amongst its respondents, almost double the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (47.1%) experienced unfair treatment due to their race/cultural background. This was significantly higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts, 33.6% of which reported having been treated unfairly in the past year (Ibid). Aboriginal participants in Andersen et., al.'s study expressed experiencing racism when looking for rentals through private real estate agents (Andersen et al. 2018). This discrimination took on different forms, such as submitting several applications with no success, not securing properties despite having a good income and employment history, or being told there were no properties available (Maalsen, et. al., 2021).

Research has shown that policies and programs achieve better outcomes for First Nations people when there is genuine control and community involvement in the program design (SCRGSP, 2016). However, there are currently no Aboriginal-controlled youth SHS in NSW that provide accommodation.

We must remedy this by considering cultural customs such as accommodating extended family and kinship care relations. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also need to be at the centre of service design and development and should be supported to lead the development of solutions alongside their communities, recognising and respecting the cultural differences that young people will

bring to this work. Through co-creation, the service will respond directly to the needs of the community leading to better, more sustainable outcomes.

Culturally safe service provision is also likely to encourage Aboriginal young people to seek support and access these services (SCRGSP, 2016). This includes establishing programs that are driven by demand, flexible in scope, and provide intensive person-centred mentoring and employment support, while also being culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Outcome E: Has the NHHA improved transparency and accountability in respect of housing and homelessness strategies, spending and outcomes for young people?

Yfoundations' response: It is time for Governments to improve their accountability and transparency for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness through the development and delivery of a National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy

This submission has demonstrated how the NHHA has consistently failed to meet the diverse and often complex needs of children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. We cannot afford to wait. We must do better for children and young people to:

- prevent homelessness and intervene early to stop the cycle of disadvantage and homelessness impacting the futures of young people and increasing the likelihood of homelessness in adulthood
- provide evidence-based responses to children and young people that have proven effective in preventing and responding to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

We must turn off the tap now to stop our children and young people from becoming homeless

If we start working in meaningful ways to turn off the tap for children and young people, then we will effectively be turning off the tap for the next generation of adults. A dedicated National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy is critical to respond to the specific issues children and young people face and to support their transition into a future of self-reliance and wellbeing. The following outlines the foundations of a proposed national youth strategy that will meet the diverse and often complex needs of children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

As part of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy, we need additional research to better understand the causes and consequences of youth homelessness in Australia. Further research is essential to better understand best practice approaches to prevent children and young people from becoming homeless in the first place and respond appropriately and effectively to those who are already experiencing homelessness.

The NHHA must require all states and territories to develop their own Youth Homelessness and Housing strategies to ensure the intent is localised.

The NHHA must include additional funding to support the successful delivery of the National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy to deliver the following evidenced based good practice approaches. Note that this list is not exhaustive and broader consultations, research and evaluations will yield further results to be considered for inclusion in the proposed Strategy.

Recommendation 5: Federal and State Governments commits resources to develop and fund an overarching National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy which outlines the approaches and resources required to effectively prevent, intervene and respond to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 6: As part of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy, the Federal and State Governments commit to funding research to understand the causes and consequences of youth homelessness in Australia and best practice approaches to respond accordingly.

Prevention and early intervention

<p>Prevention and early intervention models</p>	<p>School and community-based early intervention programs to identify and support children at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This could include universal screening programs in schools for young people, to identify those at risk of or already experiencing homelessness to provide wrap around support.</p>
<p>Family reunification</p> <p>Type something</p>	<p>The most common reason children and young people in NSW give for leaving home is relationship and family breakdowns. Leaving home renders them at risk of other adverse outcomes such as psychological distress, drug abuse and risk-taking behaviour (Dang, 2014; Owens and Codd and Haskett 2020; Begun et al, 2018), which can in turn affect their future opportunities. One of the most important factors to protect young people against these negative outcomes is positive social connections such as supportive relationships with family, schools, service providers, partners and pro-social peers (Ibid).</p> <p>Promoting family reunification is essential to achieving this. Reconnecting children and young people with their families, provided it is safe to do so, goes a long way to reduce instances of homelessness (Taylor et al, 2020).</p> <p>See below for further information about how the HYAP embeds family reunification into its service model.</p>
<p>Foyer Model and or Foyer like models</p>	<p>For at-risk young people who are ready and able to engage in post-school training and education Youth Foyers are also an important alternative. They provide at-risk young people – typically those aged 16 to 24 – with stable accommodation and support in a shared living environment for up to two years. In return, they pay affordable rent and commit to education, training and/or employment programs. By providing a safe and supported environment for vulnerable young people to learn, Youth Foyers aim to divert them away from chronic homelessness and break cycles of disadvantage.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  See Yfoundations' fact sheet about Foyer Models. </p>

Transitional housing and transitional housing plus

When leaving crisis accommodation, some 16 to 24-year-olds can access housing through transitional accommodation. Community housing providers (CHP) own and manage Transitional accommodation properties whereas SHS provide the support component. While they support the same cohort as crisis services, transitional accommodation acts as a stepping stone between the refuge and independent living. It is 'semi-independent', meaning there is a lower level of onsite support than in a refuge or medium-term accommodation.

The property types used for transitional accommodation vary - some may have individual units in multiple locations, while others offer separate bedrooms in a shared house. Young people also have a higher level of responsibility in this kind of housing as they must sign a Residential Tenancy Agreement and pay rent equating to 25% of their income. This builds tenancy management skills and creates a rental history that the young person can use if they move on to the private market. During their stay, young people receive case management and outreach support from caseworkers who help them identify their goals, build skills and access appropriate services to eventually transition into the private rental market.

However, there is currently no obligation for CHPs to allocate transitional accommodation properties to young people unless they are funded by government to do so. Research also indicates that CHPs may be reluctant to allocate properties due to the stigma attached to young people as tenants.

The model's success also depends on the availability of rental housing for young people to move into after transitional accommodation. As discussed previously, there is a dire lack of affordable properties in NSW, meaning that when trying to leave transitional accommodation, young people become 'stuck'. This has distorted the intended role of the SHS system and created a bottleneck (Bullen, 2019; Bullen & Baldry, 2019), leaving services struggling to exit young people into sustainable long-term accommodation options.

Accordingly, we must ensure that governments allocate 20% of public and community housing stock to young people in any future NHHHA and proposed National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy.

Medium term housing

Many of our young people are not developmentally ready for program or accommodation options designed to support transitions to independent living. Medium term housing fills this gap where 16-18 years are located in supported accommodation which has at least one staff member on call 24/7.

Medium term housing provides this highly vulnerable cohort with the stability they need to reconnect with family, finish their education and avoid negative longer-term outcomes. They do so by offering young people trauma-informed support and accommodation in a home-like environment. What this looks like in practice will differ across models – some may house young people in units inside a large property, while others may offer separate bedrooms and perhaps en-suites in a shared house.

Medium-term services also link vulnerable young people to other services (e.g., mental health, education) and in-house programs to help them develop life skills and transition to independence. However, Yfoundations notes that medium-term accommodation is not targeted at young people with significant untreated mental health and/or drug or alcohol issues. This high-need group requires more intensive, specialised support placements, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, therapeutic residential care, foster care or secure care.



[Refer to Yfoundations' fact sheets about Medium Term Housing](#)



[Also See Yfoundations' business case about Medium Term Housing](#)

Crisis

Crisis accommodation/refuges with wrap around support

Crisis accommodation and refuges will always be a necessary component of the homelessness service sector. However, it must be appropriately resourced to enable SHS providers to embed best practices and approaches that achieve successful outcomes for children and young people to recover from their experiences.

Approaches must be accompanied by:

- trauma informed practice to create a stable and predictable environment for young people who will overwhelmingly have trauma histories
- family support and family therapy for unaccompanied children experiencing homelessness
- access to youth health and mental health services
- access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs
- funding to provide culturally safe approaches and identified positions.

It is critical that crisis accommodation and refuges have access to exit options which are discussed further in the prevention and early intervention and long term response sections.



[See Yfoundations' Fact Sheet about Crisis and Transitional Housing](#)

Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP)

Some Youth SHS are funded under the Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) to provide services to children and young people aged 12-15 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. HYAP aims to provide integrated support and accommodation options to:

- reunify children and young people with their families and broader support networks, or
- enable children and young people to transition to longer-term supported accommodation.



[See Yfoundations' fact sheet about HYAP](#)

Long term responses

<p>Social housing (public and community housing)</p>	<p>Youth-specific social housing refers to a model of social housing that is designed to meet the unique needs of young people. Our previous consultations suggest that youth-specific social housing models should include the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term tenures, which allow young people the time to develop the skills and support needed to live independently • Access to on-site, 24/7 support as needed • Close links to amenities and public transport • Case support to assist young people to meet their psychological, health and financial needs, and address their educational and employment goals • Low or medium-density housing, to reduce the potential for high geographic concentration of disadvantage • Application processes that are clear and easy to navigate • Flexible rent models that can support young people’s changing economic situations as they shift between casual, part-time and full-time work, and education and training • Options for disability accessible accommodation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and managed accommodation, and accommodation that is available to non-Australian residents and temporary visa holder <p>(Yfoundations, 2021d).</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  See Yfoundations’ fact sheet about youth specific social housing here </p>
<p>Specialised responses for high and complex needs</p>	<p>Children and young people with significant untreated mental health and/or drug or alcohol issues require more intensive, specialised support placements, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, therapeutic residential care, treatment foster care or secure care.</p> <p>Currently, due to the shortage of mental health and alcohol and other drugs services, youth homelessness services are expected to provide responses to young people with high and complex needs. Access to these services for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness is critical to facilitate wrap-around support approaches.</p>
<p>Rent programs (e.g., Rent Choice Youth)</p>	<p>To support vulnerable young people to access the private rental market, the NSW Government has introduced a range of private rental assistance programs. One of these is the Rent Choice Youth program. For more details on the program, see further information here factsheet</p>

Housing First

Housing First is an evidence-based best practice response to people with complex needs who are experiencing chronic homelessness. However, it is likely to be unsuitable for most age cohorts of young people. Young people who are experiencing homelessness with complex needs are unlikely to have the skills to live in an apartment independently, which is integral to the Housing First model.

As this submission demonstrates, young people need targeted responses that are tailored to their specific needs. Their needs are often quite different to older people experiencing homelessness. However, it is possible that an older age group of young people from approximately 21-25 years old would benefit from a Housing First response.

It is important to ensure that Housing First approaches to other client cohorts (i.e. adults) must not be to the detriment of children and young people. Whilst Finland has been heralded as the Housing First champions, there have been some unintended consequences and negative impacts on the funding for youth homelessness services².

Multi-disciplinary responses

Multiple mainstream agencies such as youth mental health organisations, child protection, OOHC, Youth Justice, education, health sector

Governments must direct mainstream agencies to meet their responsibilities to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. For too long now, the youth homelessness sector has been picking up the shortfall of these agencies without additional funding. Governments have talked about 'wrap around' responses for over a decade now without committing the required resources to effectively achieve the intention of this approach.

²Finland is experiencing some increases in street homelessness, particularly among young people. See: [Youth homelessness increasing in Helsinki, group says | Yle](#)

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